

The Myth of Reality

Are TV shows such as *The Biggest Loser* deceptive advertising? They play into a cherished American value, that with hard work one can accomplish anything. Those folks who lose weight on the program are held up as heroes, inspirations to those of us who need to emulate their massive reductions.

But the sober reality is that permanent weight loss is extremely rare. Study after study confirms the effectiveness of the body in maintaining its size despite reductions in fuel and increases in energy expenditure. The set-point theory developed by Richard Nisbett provides a satisfying intellectual account of this homeostatic mechanism.

Are the TV losers merely the upper points of a statistical distribution? For every successful reducer we see on the program, is there someone else off camera who didn't lose weight? The ever increasing average size of Americans, many of whom tell interviewers that they did try, or are now trying, to lose weight, suggests that is indeed the case.

However, there is a unique report in the literature that gives hope. In the 1980's, Stanley Schachter interviewed everyone in two

communities of which he was a member: the small beach town where he spent his summers and the psychology department in which he worked for many years. The systematic anecdotal data he collected suggested that many people had been able to reduce their weight and to maintain that reduction.

Schachter contended the difference between his report and the remainder of the literature is that his sample was exhaustive, whereas the dieters who appear in research reports have in effect been selected for their inability to lose weight. From the set point perspective, the body becomes increasingly more effective at defending its weight against the starvation imposed by yet another diet. The body learns to turn down the thermostat to accommodate the restricted fuel supply, so the diet fails.

In contrast to the folks whose data permeates the literature, people who can reduce on their own do so, and do not seek professional help. Accordingly, successful dieters do not appear in the published studies. Schachter's report suggests that there are many people who have successfully lost weight on their own, and we should strive to find out exactly what worked for them.

Editor,

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